

Agricultural Planning and Preservation Committee (APPC or “the farm committee”)
Meeting June 19, 2007
Amended and approved July 3, 2007

Present: Melanie Gordon, Chris Hague, Ruth Jones, Michael Koski, George Malette, Dave Trumble.

Meeting called to order 5:30 by co-chair George Malette

The discussion preceding the meeting generated a lot of ideas that formed the substance of the meeting.
Minutes of June 5 accepted.

Discussion opened with a focus on **prime soils** and the importance of identifying the owners and present uses of properties classified as prime soils. Melanie Gordon looked at the town on the Internet using Granite Viewer. She expressed the need to overlay a tax map and begin collecting information about these properties.

This led to the question of how to reach the people who might be interested in the protection of agricultural soils. Gordon asked how information gets posted on the town web site, and who has access to it. Malette responded that he had heard discussion at the Selectmen’s meeting on June 4 about training Merry Rice to upload information to the website. Chris Hague will look into this for the committee.

Dave Trumble said that the Conservation Commission is required to conduct a natural resource inventory of the town. He wanted to know whether farmland was a subcategory in their inventory and whether the APPC could work in tandem with the Conservation Commission. Hague said the Antioch Institute in Keene also assisted in inventories, and she would find out if their help was relevant to our needs.

Discussion then moved to **conservation easements**, both existing and future. Malette said that we have a lot of land under conservation easements, but that if it is farmland the land can’t be touched given terms of existing easements. Trumble said he had easement language from the Piscataquog Watershed Association. Malette suggested looking at properties to see if agriculture was an appropriate use, and if so, whether the town might approach future easement holders to include agriculture in the easement.

The committee wanted to focus on the **activities the town would allow on its farms**, in the rural agricultural zones or elsewhere. Trumble suggested allowing retail so farmers could sell what they produced. The committee favored zoning flexibility that would allow this or other farm activity, if best agricultural practices were followed. Hague asked whether retail sales related to farming but not the direct result of farming would be included, such as sale of farm supplies or equipment. Gordon said that as she looked at the town zoning map she found anomalies such as a commercial section in a conservation area and asked how the zoning had been created this way. The committee agreed to review all zoning with an eye toward agriculture.

Gordon then suggested that the committee focus itself by defining its **mission** and then moving forward to **create ordinances**. This discussion generated the following points to be considered for the creation of a mission statement at the next meeting:

- identify rural agricultural land, contact owners and invite them to a discussion
- create a general statement that the town supports farms
- plan the evolution of the APPC into a more permanent agriculture committee
- raise money for a fund to use in the future to preserve farm land (similarly to the way we preserve forests)
- develop financial incentives to preserve the best soils
- refine zoning definitions to make them farm-friendly

Gordon stressed that the mission should be limited to a few items we can accomplish. Trumble suggested five points. Gordon said that the committee needed to educate the community to the fact that there are farms, and to develop an understanding of how farms operate.

Malette said voters created the Heritage Commission with authority to raise money, and have access to land with the funds. He also cited tax reductions for barns beyond a certain age. Mike Koski supported positive incentives such as tax breaks. He said current use is an incentive. The committee agreed that incentives should be regulated. For instance, for a farmer to receive a tax break the farm would have to produce a certain value of agricultural products annually.

Discussion then turned to existing statutes and documents. Ruth Jones referred to "Is Your Town Planning a Future for Agriculture?" which can be found at www.farmland.org. Malette handed out Weare's Master Plan language. Trumble asked about New Hampshire's Right to Farm statute, and Hague read language from the Massachusetts Right to Farm statement. The committee saw a need to define any terms it uses. Hague read from Lyme, N.H., zoning section 4.51 , which defines agriculture.

Malette brought up a problem that could result from the 2007 5-acre zoning ordinance in rural agricultural districts. He said people want to rezone their land to residential, and though farm preservation requires flexibility in all zones, we must consider cases where the land falls so strongly under rural agricultural that we can't make any zoning exceptions. Existing language is not strong enough to deny zoning variances.

The **zoning** discussion examined the means for deciding cluster development, and the method for determining what land to preserve and what methods would best suit preservation of prime land when planning and permitting a development. Trumble brought up the problem of protecting the easiest land to develop, which is often a field or recently farmed parcel. Recommended percentages of land to leave undeveloped in prime soils areas were discussed. Malette suggested a 20% bonus when prime land was preserved in planning a development.

For next meeting: members will bring easement language specific to farm lands, soils and tax maps, suggestions for mission, and will review Walpole and Lyme zoning statements. Members will also begin looking at Weare zoning language. Meeting with Planning Board will be July 12.

There was some discussion about the name of the committee and that the original, Farmland Preservation Committee (FPC) was more simple and easy to remember.

Next APPC meeting July 3 at 5: 00 PM in the Sawyer Room at the library. Time of subsequent meetings to be discussed as farm chores run late on summer afternoons.

Meeting adjourned 6:20 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Christine Hague

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